DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 084 608 CS 500 497

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TITLE A Conceptual Framework for Evaluating the Function of the Mass Media within the Communication Paradigm.
PUB DATE Nov 73
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (59th, New York City, November 8-11, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); Information Dissemination; *Information Theory; *Mass Media; *Media Research; Persuasive Discourse; Research Criteria; *Research Opportunities; Response Mode; Television
IDENTIFIERS *Credibility

ABSTRACT

Theories of mass communication have sought to explain how the media function internally and affect society. Rather than additional "response" studies, which investigate the impact of media on behavior or a society's impact on its media, more research should center on the functions of mass media within the overall framework of communication theory. As one of the variables in the total process of communication, any mass medium is both an extension of man's receptive senses and his communicating capabilities. Source credibility, an important consideration in a public speaking situation, is of special importance in the mass communication situation because of the high credibility of the medium itself and its ability to create or destroy a speaker's credibility. Also, medium salience is important, as well as topic salience, in determining an individual's response to a message. A mass communication theory is incomplete if it is based solely on effect or receiver response with no consideration of media functions or roles within overall communication networks. (RN)

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ED 084608

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATING THE FUNCTION OF THE MASS MEDIA WITHIN THE COMMUNICATION PARADIGM

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submitted to the
Forum Division
Speech Communication Association
New York, New York
November, 1973

CS 500 497

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A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATING THE FUNCTION OF THE MASS MEDIA WITHIN THE COMMUNICATION PARADIGM

To understand the effects of the media has been the subject of much study.[1] From these studies have evolved a number of "theories" of mass communication. These theories have been postulated as explanations of how the mass media function within (i.e., what it does to and for itself and those in contact with its periphery) and upon society (i.e., change of society as a whole). These "theories" as outlined by DeFleur are "The Individual Difference Theory, The Social Categories Theory, The Social Relationships Theory, and The Cultural Norms Theory;"[2] and by Stephenson as the "Play Theory"[3] of Mass Media. These theories (or better, partial theoretic formulations) seek to provide a wide framework and rationals for the "effects" of the media's use by society.[4] That the effects of the media have been studied perhaps to the neglect of other needful and worthwhile pursuits is explained by DeFleur:

> There are several possible explanations for the fre[illegible]nt failure to look beyond effect. First, [illegible]arly "mechanistic S-R" theory of mass communication concentrated upon effect. Second, financial support for studying this "practical" problem is far easier to obtain than for more "theoretical" questions.

> Third, there has been a high level of popular interest in effects and therefore a more ready audience for publications dealing with them.5

Because of the over-abundence of concern for what has been the "effects" of the media, theory of formulations concerning the media remain inadequate. DeFleur laments this lopsidedness:

> There are other theoretical and research questions of significance that can be asked about the media. . . Until adequate formulations have been advanced concerning the impact of societies with given characteristics on their developing media, and upon the manner in which media operate within particular societal systems, theories of mass communication will be hopelessly one-sided.

Current theories seem to have at their root a statement as to response patterns, which response becomes the observed effect. Again as DeFleur explains them,

> Thus, the logical structure of the individual differences theory is a "cause-(intervening processes)-effect" structure.
>
> The basic assumption of sociological categories theory is a sociological one--namely, that in spite of the heterogensity of modern society, people who have a number of similar modes of orientation and behavior will relate them to such phenomena as the mass media in a fairly uniform manner.8
>
> The end result. . . was the recognition that Informal Social Relationships play a significant role in <u>modifying</u> the manner in which a given individual will act upon the message which comes to his attention via the media.

> Since individual behavior is usually guided by Cultural Norms. . . with respect to a given topic or situation, the media would then serve indirectly to influence conduct.[10]

Even Stephenson's Play Theory is centered in a response approach--a response for the need for leisure:

> Play, on the contrary, is largely unproductive except for the self satisfaction it provides. . ., play. . . is always detached from "real life". . . .It is, of course, obvious that mass communication serves to inform as well as to entertain but for theoretical purposes it is wise to distinguish that part of mass communication dealing with work. . . from that concerned with leisure-time pursuits.[11]

Stephenson's statement that "the almost full-time function of the mass media in general, . . . is to entertain mass audiences"[12] seems to indicate the reason for his "play theory" approach.

The purpose of this paper then is not to advocate continued investigation of the "impact" or effects of the media on behavior nor to advocate formulation of hypotheses concerning the impact of societies with given characteristics on their developing media and upon the manner in which media operate within particular societal systems DeFleur suggests. The purpose of this paper is to present a framework for conceptualizing theory and consequently research into the mass media. Whereas current mass media theories have at their roots a statement that accounts for response, I advocate

that mass media research needs to be conducted in view of the communication paradigm and that the theoretic principles for the latter hold for the former.[13]

Communication theory does not limit itself to a study of behavioral response solely--which is what we do in mass media when we only seek to account for impact or response.[14] Communication theory has established for itself a phenomenological approach enveloped in the concept of process. This view of process sees any communication as an on-going, never-ending, without beginning or ending phenomenon.[15] Consequently, theory or research media phenomena should not overlook or neglect this phenomenological process in seeking to explain or understand some point of inquiry into the mass media.[16] The mass media themselves, from this á communication theory viewpoint, are but one of the variables within the total process of communication and become many variables as the number of available media channels are increased within the whole phenomenological process approach.

In conceptualizing mass media hypotheses and theories for research into mass media phenomena it should be recognized that any mass medium becomes not only an extension of one of man's senses in terms of stimuli reception as noted by McLuhan,[20] but also an extension of one of the capabilities of man for transmitting--or communicating, as also McLuhan

implies.[21]

As in the communication paradigm caution must be taken to understand the interacting variables of context, culture, social systems, and many other variables[22] before predicting, so it must be when conceptualizing mass media hypotheses for evaluating the function of the mass media in a society. With isolation of and an understanding of the major interacting variable theories as concerns the mass media can then be postulated and tested--and our knowledge and understanding of communication as a whole is clarified and increased, and the role and function of the mass media in particular. Consider the following: In the public speaking situation an explanation of the receiver's perception of the source's credibility is a workable concept in accounting for the receiver's response; so in mass media research this same phenomenon would appear to take on added dimensions; that is, (1) accounting for source credibility in the absence of dynamism and interpersonal attraction which would normally lead to preceived competence and trustworthiness; (2) accounting for the believability of the medium itself and (3) accounting for source credibility as filtered through medium credibility. It would seem intuitive that these two combined sources would interact to produce a unique credibility phenomenon for the mass media. That is, the source may be be-

lieved but not the medium; the source and the medium may both be believed; neither the source nor the medium may be believed; or the medium may be believed but not the source. The ability of the media to create and destroy credibility in the absence of the source's presence and the ability of the medium itself to be perceived as a credible or non-credible source provide added variables for research within the communication paradigm; and this research would lead us to a better understanding of the function of the mass media within society.

Within this framework it would seem that is a researcher accounts for the receiver's awareness that television is selective as it presents a limited reality,[27] he must also account for the receiver's perceptions of the credibility of those who select and present this limited reality and the credibility of that source being presented. Thus, an added dimension to the concept of source credibility is gained by the very nature of the mass media when it is present. The same it would seem would hold true for every other variable set forth in communication theory. If salience of a topic is an issue in understanding an individual's search for stimuli to satisfy needs, so then is salience of the medium an added dimension in search for this understanding. It would seem then that any statement as to the "ef-

fects", "impact", or function of the media must be formulated in consideration of the current communication paradigm.

From this discussion it would appear that not only are the media an extension of man in his ability to receive communication but also an extension of man in his ability to communicate; and these extensions are for man an extension of this world creating a greater need for knowledge by which to control and influence his environment. To understand the function of the media and the effects of sent and received stimuli is another way of inquiring into the function of the media upon man and upon his environment. It is this search for understanding man that raises the question of the function of the media. Only as we isolate the salient media variables and their sub-variables do we begin to understand the function of the media within the behavior of man. Thus, a mass communication theory that is simply based upon response or effect and does not include an explication of the function, initiative, or channel potential, is premature. Such theories would seem to be addressed to only half of the issues. A mass media hypothesis that neglects or overlooks the contributions of the major conceptions of communication theory (of which the mass media is subsumed) is also premature. What needs to be kept in mind when formulating a the-

ory of mass communication is its place within the communication paradigm. And what constantly needs to guide our research is that of man's use of the media in his attempts to share meaning.

REFERENCES

1. To list all of the studies ever conducted as concern the mass communication media would be exhaustive for both the reader and the writer. To get the flavor of the various kinds and types of studies the reader is referred to the indexes of the various social science journals.

2. Melvin L. DeFleur, Theories of Mass Communication (New York, David McKay Company, Inc., 1970), pp.118-154.

3. William Stephenson, The Play Theory of Mass Communication (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp.45-65.

4. Marshall McLuhan, however, in his book, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (New York, The New American Library, 1964), does discuss the profound cultural changes that result from changes in man's means of communication--or as a result of man's use of the media. See also McLuhan's article "From Counterblast" in Francis and Ludnula Voelker, eds., Mass Media: Forces in Society (Chicago, Harcourt Brace Jovanavich, 1972) pp.51-55.

5. Melvin L. DeFleur, p.176 (Chapter VII, note 3).

6. Ibid., p.119.

7. Ibid., p.122.

8. Ibid., p.123.

9. Ibid., p.127.

10. Ibid., p.129.

11. Stephenson, pp.45-48.

12. Ibid., p.50.

13. Samuel L. Becker raises this same issue when he says, "One of the first questions to consider is whether communication by radio and television is different in any basic way from communication via any other medium, including the medium of face-to-face communication. Though there are some obvious differences, such as the involvement of certain paraphernalia--microphones, cameras, receivers

--the question is whether these variations make a significant difference." From "Radio and Television" in Ronald F. Reid, ed., Introduction To The Field of Speech (Dallas, Scott, Foresman and Company, 1965), p.135.

14. See Donald Cushman and Gordon C. Whiting's "An Approach to Communication Theory: Toward Consensus and Rules", The Journal of Communication, Vol. 22 (September, 1972), pp.217-238.

15. See David K. Berlo's The Process of Communication (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston Inc., 1960). See also, Leonard C. Hawes, "Elements of a Model for Communication Processed," Quarterly Journal of Speech, Vol. 59 (February, 1973), pp.11-21; and, "The Process of Speech Communication" in Ronald F. Reid, ed., Introduction To The Field of Speech (Dallas, Scott, Foresman and Company, 1965), pp.2-14.

16. McLuhan states that this is an impossibility. He says, "Any change in the means of communication produces a chain of revolutionary consequences at every level of culture and politics. Because of the complexity of this process, prediction and control are impossible." "From Counterblast," Francis and Ludnula Voelker, eds., Mass Media: Forces in Society (Chicago, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p.52.

17. Don Fabun, Communication: The Transfer of Meaning (Beverly Hills, Glenco Press, 1968).

18. DeFleur, pp.90-96. See Also David K. Berlo's SMCR Model, Process of Communication (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1960).

19. For a discussion of this see DeFleur, p.94.

20. Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (New York, The New American Library, Inc.), pp. 19-44.

21. This implies man's abilities for both receiving and giving (sending) stimuli.

22. To list all the studies would be exhaustive. See note #1 of this paper. See also Harvey E. Eastman, "A Com-

munication Theory Bibliography Speaks Out--Softly." Journal of Communication, Vol. 22 (September, 1972), pp. 306-310.

23. The elementary theoretical system refers to the elements of the communication paradigm.

24. DeFleur, p.94.

25. See, "Credibility of the Communicatior" in Carl I. Hovland, Irving L. Janis, and Harold H. Kelly, Communication and Persuasion (New York, Yale University Press, 1966), pp.19-53. See also, Carl I. Hovland and W. Weiss, "The Influence of Source Credibility on Communication Effectiveness." Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 15 (1951), pp.635-650.

26. See note 22, above.

27. This point is noted by Samuel L. Becker. He says, "The listener or viewer needs to have some understanding of the technical aspects of the media if he is to evaluate adequately the information he receives. . .," from "Radio and Television," in Ronald F. Reid, ed., Introduction To The Field of Speech (Dallas, Scott, Foresman and Company, 1965), p.137.